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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the problem of low achievers in school and offers suggestions for helping them. It describes one high school's development of a career exploration program--including work experience in the 12th grade--to motivate students who are unable to cope with the regular program. (LD)

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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THE LOW ACHIEVER

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Topic: GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THE LOW ACHIEVER

- Wayne Von Stetten
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I MUST ADMIT TO A BIT OF UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE TOPIC UNDER DISCUSSION TODAY -- PERHAPS "HOW WE CAN BETTER PROVIDE FOR THE UNSUCCESSFUL STUDENT" WOULD BE A MORE APPROPRIATE TOPIC IN VIEW OF THE DIFFICULTY ONE EXPERIENCES IN ATTEMPTING TO IDENTIFY THE "LOW ACHIEVER". WHO IS THE LOW ACHIEVER? ARE WE JUST TALKING ABOUT THOSE STUDENTS WHO EXPERIENCE DIFFICULTY IN THE CLASSROOM? ARE WE PONDERING THE PLIGHT OF THE RELUCTANT LEARNER? ARE WE CONSIDERING ONLY THE UNDERACHIEVER - OR THE SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENT? PERHAPS TO CONFINE THESE REMARKS TO THE PROBLEMS SURROUNDING THE SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN OUR SCHOOLS TODAY WHO ARE NOT ACHIEVING ACADEMICALLY FOR A HOST OF REASONS WOULD BE THE BEST COURSE TO FOLLOW. SO, IN THIS BRIEF TIME I CHOOSE TO LIMIT MY REMARKS TO THOSE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT "CUTTING THE MUSTARD" FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER. HOPEFULLY, I CAN OFFER A FEW HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS WHICH MIGHT PROVE PRACTICAL AND USEFUL.

GOODNESS KNOWS WE HAVE HAD THE PROBLEM OF WHAT TO DO WITH THE LOW ACHIEVER WITH US FOR A CONSIDERABLE PERIOD OF TIME. IN REVIEWING MATERIALS RECENTLY THAT DEAL WITH THE SUBJECT, I FOUND THAT PROBLEMS RELATED TO THE LOW ACHIEVER HAVE BEEN AN ISSUE THAT HAS BEEN RAISED IN EDUCATIONAL CIRCLES CONTINUOUSLY FOR THE PAST QUARTER CENTURY. LITERATURE IS REPLETE WITH ARTICLES DEALING WITH THE TOPIC, MOST OF WHICH IDENTIFIES THE PROBLEM BUT OFFERS FEW SOLUTIONS. IT IS AN AGE-OLD PROBLEM AND I MIGHT ADD THAT IT IS NOT ONE THAT IS LIMITED EXCLUSIVELY

TO OUR SCHOOLS -- ALMOST EVERY AREA OF WORK FROM THE MOST HUMBLE JOBS TO PROFESSIONS, INCLUDING TEACHING, HAS A PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS WHO ACHIEVE BELOW THEIR CAPACITY AND WHO SEEM TO HAVE LITTLE INTEREST IN DOING BETTER. THE PROBLEM CANNOT BE SOLVED BY APPLYING GENERAL RULES -- EVERY BOY OR GIRL IS A DIFFERENT INDIVIDUAL AND MUST BE HANDLED IN SOME SPECIAL MANNER. WHY DO SOME STUDENTS SUCCEED AND OTHERS FAIL SO MISERABLY? THAT IS THE QUESTION THAT HAS PLAGUED EDUCATORS FOR YEARS.

IT IS FAIRLY SAFE TO START WITH THE GENERAL ASSUMPTION THAT FOR SOME REASON OR REASONS SOME STUDENTS DO NOT FIND THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE SATISFYING. IN MOST CASES THEY ARE UNABLE TO DO THEIR REQUIRED EXERCISES WELL EITHER BECAUSE OF INADEQUATE APTITUDE OR POOR EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND, OR LACK OF MOTIVATION OR ENCOURAGEMENT FROM THE HOME. EACH OF US PRESENT HERE TODAY IS AWARE OF THE NATIONAL TREND OR POLICY OF SOCIALLY PROMOTING STUDENTS - THAT IS THE PRACTICE OF REGULARLY MOVING STUDENTS ON FROM ONE GRADE LEVEL TO THE NEXT WITHOUT THEIR LEARNING TO READ REASONABLY WELL -- ONLY TO FIND THAT WHEN REACHING HIGH SCHOOL THEY ARE UNABLE TO DO THE WORK. STUDENTS CERTAINLY CANNOT UNDERSTAND OR BE INTERESTED IN HISTORY, ENGLISH, OR SCIENCE IF THEY ARE UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND THE MATERIAL WHICH THEY ARE EXPECTED TO READ. THE SAME PRINCIPLE APPLIES TO MATH, SHOP WORK, OR ANY OTHER AREA OF SCHOOL WORK. AN INABILITY OR UNWILLINGNESS TO DO THE ASSIGNED TASKS RESULTS IN A HIGH LEVEL OF FRUSTRATION ON THE PART OF THE STUDENT, AN UNWILLINGNESS TO PUT FORTH EFFORT, RESULTING IN REBELLION OR AT LEAST INDIFFERENCE. WE KNOW ONLY TOO WELL THE KINDS OF DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS WHICH EMANATE

FROM THE RANKS OF THOSE STUDENTS WHO ARE EXPERIENCING FRUSTRATION, UNHAPPINESS, AND ACADEMIC FAILURE. THERE ARE ARGUMENTS ADVANCED ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ISSUE INVOLVING SOCIAL PROMOTION. I WILL NOT ENTER INTO THAT DEBATE TODAY.

TO STATE HERE THAT THERE IS A SINGLE PANACEA AVAILABLE TO US WHICH WOULD CERTAINLY SOLVE ALL OF THE PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH THE LOW ACHIEVER WOULD BE AN INJUSTICE TO THE AUDIENCE--THERE SIMPLY IS NO SINGLE REMEDY FOR THIS DILEMMA. THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM IS ENORMOUS WHEN ONE FACES THE REALIZATION THAT WE HAVE ALL BEEN INVOLVED IN AN EDUCATIONAL REVOLUTION FOR THE PAST FIFTY YEARS OR SO. PUBLIC EDUCATION HAS BEEN GIVEN THE UNPARALLELED CHALLENGE OF EDUCATING ALL OF OUR YOUTH REGARDLESS OF THEIR ABILITY AND MOTIVATION. WE ARE RAPIDLY APPROACHING A FIGURE THAT REFLECTS THAT NEARLY 95% OF OUR 14-17 YEAR OLD YOUTH ARE NOW IN OUR HIGH SCHOOLS (OVER 15 MILLION). TIME DOES NOT PERMIT ME HERE TO DWELL ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ABOVE STATISTICS AND TO DRAW COMPARISONS WITH THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES OF OUR YOUTH IN FORMER DAYS OR TO PARALLEL OUR SYSTEM WITH OTHER COUNTRIES. THE AMERICAN SYSTEM IS INDEED "FOR ALL THE PEOPLE" AND NOT FOR JUST THE ACADEMICALLY OR ECONOMICALLY ELITE. WITH THIS GREAT AMERICAN REVOLUTION IN EDUCATION COMES A COLLECTION OF PEOPLE IN ALL SHAPES, COLORS, SIZES, AND ABILITIES. NO WONDER THE CHALLENGES WE FACE TODAY ARE OVERWHELMING; NO WONDER EVERY SCHOOL IN AMERICA HAS ITS SHARE OF STUDENTS WE COMMONLY CLASSIFY AS LOW OR NON ACHIEVING. EVEN THOUGH THE PERCENTAGE OF POOR ACHIEVERS IS LOW, THE NUMBERS REALIZED ARE CONSIDERABLE.

I CANNOT ENTER INTO ANY SOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM WITHOUT

MENTIONING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MOTIVATING THE LOW ACHIEVER AND THE CORRELATION BETWEEN SUCCESS IN THAT AREA AND THE SELECTION OF THE RIGHT TEACHER. WE ALL RECOGNIZE THAT SOME TEACHERS POSSESS THAT SOMETHING EXTRA WHICH ENABLES THEM TO STIMULATE STUDENTS TO LEARN EVEN BEYOND THEIR CAPACITY. ENTHUSIASM FOR TEACHING, GENERAL PERSONAL INTEREST IN THE PUPIL, THE ABILITY TO DRAMATIZE ORDINARY LEARNING SITUATIONS, A SENSE OF HUMOR (SO VERY IMPORTANT), AND UNLIMITED PATIENCE ARE VALUABLE QUALITIES WHEN SELECTING STAFF TO WORK WITH THE LOW ACHIEVER. I THINK THERE IS ALSO SOME IMPORTANCE IN MENTIONING HERE THAT THERE IS WISDOM IN COUNSELING SOME LOW ACHIEVERS TO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL ONCE BEYOND THE COMPULSORY ATTENDANCE AGE. IN MANY CASES THE ADDED MATURITY OF EVEN ONE YEAR MAKES A MARKED DIFFERENCE IN THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARD THE NEED FOR EDUCATION. A FULL TIME JOB FOR SOME OF THESE STUDENTS WHO HAVE LOOKED UPON SCHOOL AS A "PRISON" RATHER THAN A PRIVILEGE MIGHT POSSIBLY DEVELOP A MODEST THIRST FOR KNOWLEDGE IF THE OPPORTUNITY SEEMS TO BE SLIPPING AWAY FROM THEM.

I MENTIONED EARLIER IN MY PRESENTATION THAT I WOULD ATTEMPT TO LIMIT MY REMARKS TO A REMEDY OR TWO THAT MIGHT POSSIBLY BE OF ASSISTANCE TO THE MEMBERS OF THE AUDIENCE. I AM, THEREFORE, GOING TO DEVOTE MY CONCLUDING COMMENTS TO A PROGRAM CURRENTLY UNDERWAY IN BRANDYWINE HIGH SCHOOL IN WILMINGTON, DELAWARE - A PROGRAM WHICH WE FEEL HAS DONE MUCH TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THAT SEGMENT OF OUR SCHOOL POPULATION WHICH SIMPLY HAS NOT BEEN ABLE TO COPE WITH THE "REGULAR" PROGRAM.

EACH SCHOOL HAS EXPERIENCED A CONSIDERABLE GROWTH IN THE NUMBER OF WHAT WE COMMONLY CALL SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS PRIMARILY AS A RESULT OF PL 92-142. WE HAVE SEEN AT OUR SCHOOL THE NUMBER OF IDENTIFIED SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS IN THE PAST SEVEN YEARS GROW FROM SIX TO FIFTY. WITH THE ARRIVAL OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENT IN INCREASING NUMBERS, WE RECOGNIZED QUITE EARLY THAT SPECIAL PROGRAMS MUST BE DEVISED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THESE STUDENTS. I THINK ONE OF THE FIRST POINTS THAT IMPRESSED US WAS THE FACT THAT WE HAD THE RESPONSIBILITY OF DOING ALL THAT IS POSSIBLE TO PREPARE THESE STUDENTS FOR THE NEXT PLATEAU - WHICH IN THIS CASE WOULD BE THE WORLD OF WORK. BRANDYWINE HIGH SCHOOL IS NOT A VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL - IT IS A TYPICAL SUBURBAN COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL, WITH OVER 80% DESTINED FOR HIGHER EDUCATION. WE DID, HOWEVER, EMBARK UPON A PROGRAM WHEREBY WE COULD INTRODUCE OUR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS TO THE WORLD OF WORK THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CAREER EXPLORATION PROGRAM. CAREER EXPLORATION IS, IN OUR VIEW, AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT AND NECESSARY STEP IN PREPARING HANDICAPPED OR LOW ACHIEVING STUDENTS TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN THEIR POST-HIGH SCHOOL YEARS. WE UNDERSTANDABLY FOUND THAT MANY OF THE STUDENTS IN THE SPECIAL ED DEPARTMENT ARE SEVERELY LIMITED IN THEIR CAPABILITIES. ANOTHER POINT THAT WE RECOGNIZED EARLY WAS THAT THESE STUDENTS ARE GOING TO REMAIN WITH US <u>REGARDLESS</u> OF THEIR CAPABILITY, REGARDLESS OF THEIR AGE, AND REGARDLESS OF THE NUMBER OF YEARS THAT THEY HAVE TO SPEND IN OUR FACILITY. WE DETERMINED THAT PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEM TO LEARN NECESSARY JOB RELATED SKILLS IS PART OF THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION'S DEPARTMENT AT BRANDYWINE

HIGH SCHOOL. I AM LISTING SOME OF THE OBJECTIVES THAT OUR DEPARTMENT USES AS GUIDELINES FOR OUR CAREER EXPLORATION PROGRAM.

1. STUDENTS WILL BE MADE AWARE OF THE MANY CAREER AREAS AVAILABLE TO THEM AND BE FAMILIAR WITH FACILITIES WHERE IN DEPTH INFORMATION ON JOBS CAN BE OBTAINED.

2. AS A RESULT OF THIS PROGRAM, STUDENTS WILL HAVE A GENERAL IDEA OF THEIR OWN APTITUDES AND INTERESTS SO THAT THEY CAN MAKE A RESPONSIBLE AND LOGICAL CHOICE OF A VOCATION.

3. STUDENTS WILL DEVELOP A POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD EMPLOYERS, JOBS, AND OTHER EMPLOYEES.

4. STUDENTS' SKILLS WILL INCREASE IN JOB-RELATED AREAS (UNDERSTANDING WANT ADS, FILLING OUT FORMS, INTERVIEWING, ETC.)

5. PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS ARE EXAMINED AND IMPROVED BY STUDENTS (PERSONALITY, HYGIENE, DRESS, RESPONSIBILITY, ETC.)

6. SPECIFIC JOB SKILLS (TYPING, WOODWORKING, ETC.) CAN BE IMPROVED BY STUDENTS THROUGH CURRICULAR PLANNING.

7. WHENEVER POSSIBLE STUDENTS ARE EXPOSED TO REAL WORK SITUATIONS ON AN IN-SCHOOL BASIS OR IN THE COMMUNITY.

8. UTILIZING LOCAL AGENCIES, STUDENTS RECEIVE SPECIAL SKILL TRAINING AND/OR WORK EXPERIENCE.

THE CAREER EXPLORATION PROGRAM BEGINS AS SOON AS STUDENTS ENTER TENTH GRADE AT BRANDYWINE HIGH SCHOOL, AND CONTINUES THROUGHOUT THEIR THREE YEARS. IT IS A COORDINATED EFFORT OF THE SOCIAL STUDIES, MATH AND ENGLISH TEACHERS WITHIN THE INDIVIDUAL PROGRESS DEPARTMENT, IN COOPERATION WITH THE SCHOOL GUIDANCE DEPARTMENT. THE FIRST YEAR, STUDENTS ARE EXPOSED TO MANY GENERAL AREAS OF JOBS AND BASIC JOB HUNTING SKILLS. IN ELEVENTH GRADE, THEY ARE GIVEN EXTENSIVE APTITUDE AND INTEREST TESTS BY COUNSELORS AND CLASSROOM TEACHERS. THE U.S. HISTORY CLASSES SET ASIDE TIME TO EXPLORE VARIOUS AREAS OF POSSIBLE EMPLOYMENT AND WHAT THEY ENCOMPASS. SPEAKERS REPRESENTING VARIOUS AREAS OF EMPLOYMENT IN THE COMMUNITY TALK TO THE STUDENTS ABOUT THEIR JOBS. FILMSTRIPS ARE SHOWN ABOUT JOB ATTITUDES AND SKILLS, AND MANY OTHER RESOURCES ARE TAPPED. AT THE SAME TIME, ENGLISH CLASSES STUDY VOCABULARY LISTS OF JOB-RELATED WORDS. THE STUDENTS ARE GIVEN PRACTICE IN WRITING RESUMES, FILLING OUT APPLICATIONS, AND OTHER FORMS SUCH AS WORK PERMITS, INSURANCE, AND TAXES. IN MATH CLASSES, STUDENTS ARE DOING THE MATH INVOLVED IN JOB-RELATED AREAS SUCH AS TAXES, CREDIT BUYING, BANKING, CHECK WRITING, AND FIGURING PAYCHECKS.

TWELFTH GRADE IS A CONTINUATION OF THIS PROGRAM WITH EMPHASIS PUT ON SPECIAL SKILL TRAINING, SELECTING A VOCATION, AND WORK EXPERIENCE. DURING THIS YEAR, MANY STUDENTS GO OUT INTO THE COMMUNITY TO WORK IN LOCAL BUSINESSES PART TIME, WHILE THEY REMAIN IN SCHOOL PART TIME. SOME WORK WITHIN THE SCHOOL IN THE CAFETERIA, LEARNING FOOD PREPARATION AND OTHERS ARE EMPLOYED IN TYPING JOBS IN THE VARIOUS SCHOOL OFFICES. THESE JOBS ARE OBTAINED BY A COORDINATED EFFORT OF THE TEACHING TEAM, OTHER SCHOOL DEPARTMENTS, AND THE STUDENTS THEMSELVES. IT IS A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM BECAUSE IT COMBINES SCHOOL, WORK EXPERIENCE; PLUS THE IMPORTANT FACT THAT THE STUDENTS ARE PAID FOR THEIR SERVICES WHICH OFTEN IMPROVES THEIR SELF-CONCEPT AND SELF-CONFIDENCE.